

Turning 16 Days into 16 Years: A Calgary Perspective on Strategies for Enhancing the Success, the Long-Term Impacts and the Legacies of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games on Salt Lake City, Utah

Summary Report

In 1999, the Utah Division of Travel Development commissioned J.R. Brent Ritchie, a notable tourism researcher and Chair of the World Tourism Education & Research Centre at the University of Calgary, to conduct a study regarding the possible applications of Calgary's 1988 Olympic experience to Salt Lake City's 2002 Olympic preparations. The following is a summary of Mr. Ritchie's observations.

- A successful event and successful marketing of the host city are distinctly different concepts.
- There seems to be no such thing as a "typical Games." There is no "fixed formula." Each host city/region has its own unique physical, social and political characteristics that combine to create unique advantages and challenges.
- Ensure the Games themselves are a major success. In the end, the major image of the host city relates to the message of the competence and perceived desirability of the destination.
- Ensure there is no "financial hangover." Nothing will turn host city residents against tourism development faster than the prospect of a long-term taxpayer liability.
- Extensive and detailed planning is essential. But flexibility and adaptability must be an integral part of the organization. In 1988, the Chinook Winds that blew for much of the 16 days of the Games almost turned the "Winter Games" into the "Summer Games." A high degree of adaptability proved essential to success.
- Getting there is definitely not half the fun. Ease of access and an efficient transportation system are critical. In Calgary, the use of very large, easily accessible parking lots reduced severe congestion and avoided a common criticism.
- Visible local support sends an important message to the media – and the world.
- The focus of Olympic attention can create new resort communities in very short time frames. The small town of Canmore, the site for cross-country skiing, has grown from a few thousand to nearly ten thousand since 1988. It is now larger than Banff (Canada's mountain icon), and is rapidly starting to rival Banff in terms of facilities and visitation.
- Be a true international host – be prepared for disappointments and controversies regarding the performance of national. Resist the temptation to overlook the successes of visiting athletes.
- Be prepared for the post-Games letdown. Although Calgary residents were close to exhaustion when the Olympic Flame was doused, there was an almost universal feeling of sadness that, after so much planning and effort, the once-in-a-lifetime experience was over.
- Start getting ready immediately to fill the void that is created in the post-Olympic environment. Since it is unlikely the Games will ever return; it is advisable to start right away to identify other "visions" for community and destination development.

- In the short run, tourism may suffer more than it benefits from hosting the Games. However, in the long run, tourism is usually greatly enhanced by the hosting of the event. Many tourism operators were caught unawares from a fall off in business during the 1988 Games. Now, more than 10 years later, both leisure and business visitations have grown at rates above the national average.
- The leverage that can be gained by building “alliances” can greatly enhance the total success of the Games. The many smaller village, towns and even cities that are in reasonably close proximity to the event want to both contribute to – and benefit from – a mega-event experience. Sharing, without diluting the essence of destination identity, can create a stronger product.
- The cultural component of the Olympic program turned out to be highly supportive and an important contributor to the overall success of the Games and tourism destination development. The diversity of cultural events enables the organizers to spread the “Olympic experience” into many geographic areas.
- The difficulty in marketing a province/state. It is clear that the hosting of an Olympic Games puts the primary focus on the host city. However, in the case of the Calgary Games, the Alberta Government saw the event as an opportunity to market the province as a tourism destination – and accordingly, it invested substantially in support of the Games. However, attempts to launch a new “Alberta image” gave rather poor results.
- The primary marketing theme should be consistent with a politically supported “vision” for the future of the host city/region/state. As powerful as they are, Olympic campaigns to promote the host destination should build on and enhance existing appeals.
- North American and international awareness of Calgary was dramatically increased as a result of the Olympic Games coverage. In the case of Calgary, unaided top-of-mind awareness increased from about 19% to over 43% in the U.S. In Europe, it rose from 10% to 40%. In both cases, this represents a four-fold increase in destination awareness.
- In addition, TV coverage resulted in a substantial change in Calgary's international image. Calgary's image shifted from that of primarily being the “stampede city” to that of being the “Olympic city.”
- Make sure your marketing image for the Games is consistent with residents' view of themselves and the region. Attempts to use a short-term marketing image for the Games risks alienating those on whom long-term success in tourism depends – residents.
- Getting the Games “at any cost” is no longer an option. The repercussions of past practice in obtaining the Games have made the task of hosting the event much more difficult.
- The entire Olympic movement, under the IOC, is in serious danger of losing its credibility. The disillusionment of world citizens as a result of questionable bidding practices and on-going drug problems, and the growing power of professional sport could be a deadly potion.